

My name is Mary Ann Ryan. I am an RN, have practiced nursing for many years and am presently employed at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital, working part-time on a medical unit.

In February of 2009, I accompanied friends from my parish to the Hope Hospitality and Warming Center to supply food and assistance as needed. During the course of the evening there were several medical emergencies (that went unaddressed) and one death. I approached the director of the facility to ask if there were any medical professionals on staff. When he said that he was looking for someone to fill that position, I volunteered. I have been going to the Hope Hospitality and Warming shelter every Thursday night while it was in operation since that day.

When I began at Hope, I had no goals or objectives in providing any medical care – I just wanted to see where the need was. I quickly became aware of many gaps in service, particularly in the care of the mentally ill. By the end of the first year of volunteering, I realized that at least 80% of the guests had some form of mental illness, ranging from depression to severe psychosis. When psychotic guests acted out, they were evicted, left to fend for themselves on the street.

Hope is a low barrier shelter. We take everyone regardless of whether they are inebriated or high on drugs. They are searched for contraband before entering the facility to ensure that drugs and alcohol are not consumed on the premises. Even though we have moved to a new facility, and have a greater range of services including a Common Ground representative and the community housing network, the mentally ill still continue to fall through the cracks when it comes to mental health services.

It is my contention, after dealing with the homeless for a period of 4 years now, that there is a great need for all low barrier shelters in the state of Michigan to be a point of entry into the mental health system. A case worker functioning even on a part time basis would greatly alleviate the gaps that occur because of the inability of the guests to follow through, particularly when it comes to the people suffering from psychosis.

At Hope Hospitality and Warming Center, our director has made a great effort to insure that psychotic individuals are not evicted to the street. She has spent a good deal of time going to court in order to enter these individuals into the mental health system. It is frustrating to all of us when we see these same folks discharged from mental health facilities without support or follow-up, only to be housed once more at Hope.

Other low barrier shelters may not be so compassionate. The mentally ill do not choose their lot – they are victims of their own neurophysiology. It is time that we view their struggle as organic brain diseases instead of an attitude or a lifestyle. We must protect those suffering from psychosis from the abuse that occurs on the streets. It should be the focus of mental health services to insure that these individuals reside in a safe, nurturing environment. That can only be done if mental health services are expanded into the areas where mental illness is most prevalent – on the streets, in jails and in homeless shelters.

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